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Bentonville: What a Bummer Knows
About It.

PREPARED BY COMPANION

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Bentonville: What a Bummer Knows About it.

March 18, 1864.⁵

COMMANDER AND COMPANIONS: It is not my purpose to write the strategic details of a battle. So far as I know, the battle of Bentonville has not been written by others than one who commanded a corps in the Confederate Army. I intend to give you my recollections of the battle, which to Sherman's army was the most important of the many events of the campaign in the Carolinas.

Brigade, division, corps, and army commanders write up, from official documents, campaigns and battles and make what may be termed official history. Want of space between the covers of the book prevents personal mention of the men who fired the muskets. But the men who fired the muskets and swung the sabres have their own stories to tell. The graduate from the college, the farm, shop, and lumber camp fought side by side in the ranks, each a student of war, no two seeing with the same eyes.

I give you the recollections of a captain, pleading guilty to the charge of being a Bummer, and explaining how I became one.

Sherman's army left Atlanta in the fall of 1864, with but twelve days' rations of hard bread, coffee, salt, and sugar in the trains. This, with what the men carried in their haversacks, was the visible supply. Meat in all its various forms, fodder for the animals, and breadstuffs to piece out the hard tack must be gathered from the country through which we passed. To do that systematically men were detailed from each regiment, placed under command of a commissioned officer, and

sent out each day to the front and along the flanks. The competition of so many different details, especially in a country where peanuts and cotton were the staple farm products, coupled with the opposition of the enemy's cavalry and Georgia Home Guards, soon forced the consolidation of the foragers, as they were then called, into brigade and division details, for mutual protection, and I have known a brigade detail to scatter for the same reason.

I found myself commanding a brigade detail consisting of ninety men and three commissioned officers, mounted upon the best stock to be found in the country. Our duties consisted in foraging and fighting anything and everything that came in our way, picking up rebel stragglers and deserters, hunting out the roads, and acting as scouts and guides. Letters from the few post-offices in the country, maps hanging on the walls of village and country homes, newspapers old or new, all were taken and sent to headquarters.

The term "Forager" was not large enough to designate this new addition to the army, and the word "Bummer" was born. I know some people at this distance from the war who look upon the bummer as "a trick of sins." The term has fallen into disgrace. To-day the walking delegate of the Saloon-Keepers' Union is known upon the streets as a bummer. One step down in the social scale and we have tramp, tramp, tramp.

Bummer was a title born to Sherman's army on the march to the sea. In the scramble for corn and bacon its pedigree was lost, and he who seeks to claim it now is liable to receive a bad title.

However, the Bummer in his degree of rank commanded all the corn-cribs and fodder-stacks in Georgia and the Carolinas. He made of his profession high art, and high art is always morality.

The variety of work and duties called the best men from the

ranks - men of known endurance and courage. Strict discipline was maintained, and there were no stragglers. Men were not safe out of sight of the columns. There was not a single day during the month of March, 1865, that my detail was not fighting or skirmishing with some part of the enemy's forces.

Nearly the entire distance between Savannah and Goldsboro the cavalry of our army was to the left of our marching infantry columns, the fronts of different army corps being covered by the mounted Bummers. They often knew the location of the different Confederate commands better than their own. Many a gallant fight was made for hogs and hominy that was never reported at headquarters.

The battle of Averysboro was fought on the 16th of March, a victory for our men. During the night the enemy retreated. It was a cold, wet, miserable night, the rain falling in torrents. The country was acres of mud and ponds of water. The enemy had a few wagons. These they filled with their wounded men and left them stalled in the mire along the road. Having but a few pieces of artillery, they outmarched us and were soon lost in the forests of the country.

The 17th and 18th were fine spring days, the country very poor in supplies and the enemy having the first pick. On the 18th my detail fought Dibbrell's brigade of cavalry, driving them back mile after mile, keeping the road clear for the division that was following—"Carlin's." It was a series of running fights from one piece of woods to another. There were many turpentine stills, and they were invariably fired, sending up dense black columns of smoke, good as signal flags to indicate our course and location to those who followed. At one of these stills we found four dead and one mortally wounded man, lying where they fell, their comrades leaving too hurriedly to give them attention.

Dibbrell's brigade at this time was very badly demoralized;

not more than six hundred strong, poorly supplied with ammunition, driven all the way from Tennessee, they were but mere fragments left of companies, or regiments, while their commander, to use a Georgia saying, "cavorted magnanimously." One-half of his men were always a little too fast, and the other half a little too slow.

A few of my men were armed with Springfield rifles, the balance with Colt's revolving rifles and Spencer carbines.

Late in the afternoon I halted my command to await the advance of the division. It not coming up, we fell back two miles, going into camp at headquarters of the division. The stubborn resistance of the enemy during the latter part of the day convinced me that they were planning a repetition of the action of the 16th. I also gained some information from citizens and the wounded man captured at the turpentine still. I reported in person to Gen. Carlin, who sent the information to Gen. Sherman, who did not credit it. My command had made and drank their coffee—they had little else—and were rolled in their blankets, sleeping, when I returned, after midnight, from headquarters, having received the countersign for the next five days, and orders to move out at three o'clock next morning and join the division next night at Cox's bridge, twenty-five miles north. We did camp there, but it was four days later. Gen. Carlin's last words to me were, "If you cannot drive the enemy, flank them."

At three o'clock the men were aroused, horses fed, coffee made, and before four o'clock the command filed out of the woods into the main road, the men tired, sore, cross, and ugly, but every one in his place. The road led through forests of pine with but little cleared land. A few men were sent out as an advance-guard. When about two miles out, and just as it began to grow light, the advance surprised a sleeping picket-post

of a few men huddled about a small fire at the side of the road, their ragged gray blankets wrapped about their shoulders. They dropped everything that was not tied to them, and ran into the woods, escaping us in the darkness. Their guns were bent out of shape, and, with their other effects, thrown into the fire. Supposing that these men belonged to Dibbrell and that we were near his camp, we pushed on, hoping to surprise them. The road ran down a hill, across a swamp with deep water and tangled brush on each side. I led the advance-guard, and passing out of the swamp found the picket-line along the edge of the swamp. It then had become quite light. The pickets on the road discharged their guns as they started on the run for the reserves. My men fired a few shots at these pickets as we spurred our horses forward and up the hill, when, to our surprise, we came in full sight of a line of earthworks, not more than forty rods away. As far as I could see to the right and the left the dirt from thousands of shovels was flying in the air. The alarm caused by the picket-firing had created confusion in the enemy's camp—officers shouting to their men to fall in line, and the men throwing away their shovels and securing their guns. Realizing at once that we were unexpected and unwelcome callers, I retired my command to the opposite side of the swamp, dispatching one of my best men with information of my discovery at once to Gen. Carlin, but he never reached his destination. He must have been killed by a bushwhacker, for he is still one of the missing. .

Leaving a lieutenant with thirty men as a skirmish-line at this crossing of the swamp, I moved to the left with the balance, and about a mile from there found a small corn-cracker grist mill with a good supply of corn. The mill was in charge of a young woman, who dipped the corn into the hopper with a gourd, and carried away the meal in a bag to her home, a few rods distant. One man was left at the mill to keep it grinding,

and with the balance we crossed the dam, that also served as a highway, turned to the right a half mile or so, and again struck the rebel picket line, and had the good fortune to capture two of them, who gave us the information that Gen. Joe Johnson's army was all there. They had marched all night to get into position, and there were ten thousand infantry then in the front line building breastworks.

In driving this picket line we had come near two pieces of light artillery. They opened fire on us, throwing shells higher than the tops of the pine trees through which we passed. This artillery fire was the first alarm to Carlin's division. The two prisoners were mounted and sent under guard to Carlin, but became lost on one of the many blind roads and did not reach Carlin until he had come up with his division and attacked the enemy.

I only digress to say that Buell's brigade, from which my command was recruited, charged the works when I first discovered them in the early morning, losing a full one-third of their numbers, many of the men falling inside the earthworks.

I withdrew my command from this advanced position, without loss, to the grist mill, crossing to the south side of the stream and placing my men behind a rail fence that skirted the stream and mill-pond. The animals were taken into a dense swamp to our left, in water knee-deep. Every man was free to become a fighter.

The disposition of men and animals was but fairly made, when there came down through the pines on the opposite side of the pond, at a sharp trot, a battalion of troopers in gray. They were led along the edge of the mill-pond by an officer mounted on a fine gray horse. The head of the column turned to cross to our side of the pond, when the order to fire was given. The crash of fifty rifles from the men in ambuscade seemed to have emptied fifty saddles, as if every man had

picked his game. An instant, and then came the second volley, every man firing at will, the shots falling like rain-drops on the roofs of our canvas tents in the night.

The surprise was complete, the confusion beyond description. Horses plunged through the woods in flight, men and horses mingled stretched upon the green slope. There seemed no escape from the repeating-rifles. The gallant commander clinging to his saddle with the last moment of life, the frantic animal sprang from the road into the pond, and both disappeared beneath the water. His disappearance from the sight of man was one of war's mysteries. It seemed but a moment, when all was over—the dead, the dying, the wounded strewing the ground, the few escaping into the friendly woods hurried along by the cheers of the victorious Bummers. It was war, but war is an unknown quantity. A troop of cavalry, probably belonging to the same command just defeated, found a crossing through the swamp to our right and rear. Guided by the firing and the cheers of our men, they fell upon our flank, the first warning coming in the shape of leaden messengers. It needed but a glance: coming straight for us was a long line of "Johnnies," using their carbines as they came across the field. Nobody waited for orders. The best time made by professional sprinters was slow compared with that made by the Bummers as they ran for the swamp to the left where we had placed our horses. It was every man for himself, and the "Johnnies" for the hindmost. The swamp gave shelter and safety to all but four of the men, they could not outrun rebel lead. My own horse was picketed at the edge of the swamp, an animal I had ridden many hundreds of miles and to whom I was warmly attached. I thought I saw a chance to save him. Mounting, I gave him the spurs. He fairly flew along the edge of the swamp towards our main lines. I used my revolver as I never had a chance to use it before. My horse

was giving his life to save mine. I could feel his body quiver as the deadly bullets struck him. The noble animal carried me safely out of danger, into the friendly shelter of a regiment going into position to protect the flank of the army; with a jet of hot blood spurting from a wound in his neck, he dropped on his knees and fell over dead before I could remove saddle and bridle. In a few hours' time I had changed places and found myself with nothing of my command except personal equipments. With the saddle on my own back I set out, mentally offering many kingdoms for a horse.

This ended the Bummers' fight at Bentonville, but those who fought and got away did heaps of duty on following days.



